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MILTON'S KING ARTHUR

BY HELEN COOPER

It is well known that Milton's original plan for the subject of the epic poem he intended to write was on King Arthur, and existing scholarship has concentrated on that historical tradition. After the unreliability of that tradition compelled him, under pressure from Renaissance epic theory, to abandon those plans, King Arthur did not lose his appeal for him. He was also familiar with the 'romance' version of Arthur—in Harding, Malory (sometimes doubted) and Spenser (not always thought of as Arthurian), among others—and knowledge of this makes it possible not only to offer firmer identification of some of his allusions but also to write something of the biography of his imagination as his perception of Arthurian material changed from inspiration to threat.

It is well known that the young Milton's early plans for his future life imagined that the culminating poem of his career would be an epic on the subject, not of the Fall of Man, but of early British history, including King Arthur. He mentions the idea briefly on several occasions; he spent a considerable time in the 1630s reading everything available to him, but if he began writing it too, as has been suggested, the attempt was abortive, and nothing survives.[1] The nine-column article on it by J. M. Steadman in the *Milton Encyclopedia* would seem to bring together everything that might be known about this proposed Arthuriad, given that it does not exist;[2] perhaps because of that, recent scholarship generally has elided Milton's interest in Arthurian history almost into invisibility in favour of the contemporary history through which he was living.[3] The received wisdom relating to this unwritten epic follows the supposed historical tradition deriving from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* of c. 1136: this is the work that Milton cites most explicitly, and which is the single major source for the whole early

1 See W. R. Parker, *Milton: A Biography*, ed. Gordon Campbell, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1996), 186–7, 190.

2 *A Milton Encyclopedia*, general ed. William B. Hunter, jr, (Lewisburg and London, 1978), s.v. *Arthuriad*. Steadman doubts the claim that the work was ever started. Roberta Florence Brinkley, in her still useful study of 1932, gives a rapid overview of Milton's Arthurian references and concludes that he abandoned the Arthurian epic because his sympathies lay increasingly with the Saxons rather than the British (*The Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century* (repr. New York, 1970), 126–41).

3 It is effectively absent from both Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work and Thought* (Oxford, 2008), and Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* (Oxford, 2009). An honourable exception to this overlooking is Thomas Roebuck's 'Milton and the Confessionalization of Antiquarianism', in Edward Jones (ed.), *Young Milton: The Emerging Author, 1620–1642* (Oxford, 2013), 48–71, which uses Milton's abandonment of the epic to frame his argument about Milton's polemical writings on ecclesiastical controversies (49–52, 64–6).

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history of Britain in which he envisages having his Arthur embedded. Even his most historical-looking allusions, however, tend to supplement Geoffrey from other sources, not excluding his own imagination. If one approaches Milton from the broader medieval traditions of Arthur, and, in particular, by way of the romance tradition, there is therefore more to be said—and that 'more' includes some new possibilities, not only for the sources of his allusions, but also about the poet's changing understanding of and attitudes to Arthurian material as he matured. Milton's engagement with Arthur moved from high poetic ambition to scepticism and disappointment, as he realized just how untrustworthy the Galfridian tradition was; but just as significantly, it also moved from imaginative fascination with the seductive world of the romance Arthur to a belief that that seduction was dangerous, even diabolic.

Most of what is known of Milton's ambitions for a British epic is recorded in brief mentions in two of his Latin poems, written at the period when he was most actively planning the project. The first, *Mansus*, was written for John Baptista Manso, marquis of Villa, the distinguished Italian literary man and former patron of Tasso whom Milton had met in late 1638 on the visit he made to Italy. In the poem, written either late that year or early the next, he outlines the scope of his future epic:

> Si quando indigenas revocabo in carmina reges,
> Arturumque etiam sub terris bella moventem;
> Aut dicam invictae sociali foedere mensae,
> Magnanimos heroas, et (O modo spiritus ad sit)
> Frangam Saxonicas Britonum sub Marte phalanges. *Mansus* 80–4[4]

If ever I bring back to life in my songs the kings of my native land and Arthur, who set wars raging even under the earth, or tell of the great-hearted heroes of the round table, which their fellowship made invincible, and—if only the inspiration would come—smash the Saxon phalanxes beneath the impact of the British charge.

The principal source for this is Geoffrey of Monmouth, but even here, he clearly had other sources available to him too. Geoffrey makes no mention of the fellowship of the table, *sociali foedere mensae*, which first appears in Wace's Anglo-Norman poetic redaction of Geoffrey. It is not mentioned by Holinshed, but it is picked up in John Harding's romance-influenced *Chronicle*, written in the wake of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, and which Milton is known to have read; and of course in the *Morte Darthur* itself, which various allusions (discussed below), most particularly one in *Paradise Regained*, indicate may safely be added to his list of reading. It is in any case true, in the seventeenth century as now, that one does not have any specific source for knowing that the Round Table is part of the Arthurian scheme of things.

4 Quotations, and translations where relevant, are taken for the poems from the Longman edition, *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2nd edn (Harlow, 1997) and *Milton: Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn (Harlow, 1998).

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The detail of the allusion thus shows that Milton was not rigorously confining himself to the historical tradition alone; and the reference to Arthur *sub terris bella moventem*, making wars under the earth, adds a more fantastic legendary element to supplement the Round Table of the romance Arthur. Although ideas of Arthur's survival beyond death, or sleeping under the earth, had been current since at least the early twelfth century, some decades before Geoffrey was writing, his warring under the earth is altogether more obscure, and it is not at all clear where Milton got it from. John Carey's edition cites the Welsh *Spoils of Annwfn*, from *The Song of Taliesin*;[5] this tells of a raiding party carried out by Arthur and his followers on a Celtic underworld, but it is not evident how Milton could have known the text or any legend associated with it (it first gets significant attention only after his death, with the antiquarian Richard Lhuyd), and it is in any case so obscure in terms of both language and narrative that he could scarcely have picked out such a meaning from it if he had. A more likely source for the line is the legend first recorded by Gervase of Tilbury, of Arthur's supposed continued survival in a cave under Mount Etna.[6] The tradition was widely known in Italy, and Milton might well have heard it there if he had not come across it before; the Italian location would make the allusion in a poem written for Manso especially appropriate. The Arthur of Etna was generally taken, however, to be recovering from his wounds, as he did in Avalon, rather than waging wars. Other texts do represent him as aggressive. Etienne of Rouen's late twelfth-century political satire *Draco Normannicus*, for instance, tells of an Arthur inhabiting the Antipodes who threatens to make war on Henry II, but it survives now in only one manuscript acquired in the mid-seventeenth century by the bibliophile Alexandre Petau after being stolen from the library of the abbey of St Victor in Paris, and the chances of Milton's knowing it are vanishingly small.[7] Another text that was certainly accessible to him, though there is no firm evidence that he read it, is the prose romance of *Huon of Bordeaux*, which in Lord Berners' translation went through several editions down to 1601. If the condemnations of it by assorted humanists and moralists are anything to go by, it enjoyed considerable popularity; Spenser cites it at the start of Book II of the *Faerie Queene*, when he has Guyon, the knight of Temperance (who especially appealed to Milton), knighted by Huon.[8]

5 Ed. Carey, note to line 81.

6 *Gervase of Tilbury, Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*, ed. and trans. S.E. Banks and J.W. Binns (Oxford, 2002), 334–7.

7 Etienne of Rouen, 'Epistola Arturi Regis ad Hencricum regem Anglorum', from *Draco Normannicus*, in Mildred Leake Day (ed. and trans.), *Latin Arthurian Literature* (Cambridge, 2005), 236–57 ('ad Arturum olim Britanniae regem missa, qui tunc apud antipodes degebat', 236 ['sent to Arthur, once king of Britannia, now residing among the Antipodes']), and 53–4 for the history of the manuscript.

8 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, A.C. Hamilton (ed.), 2nd edn (Harlow, 2001), II.i.6. Guyon, as the knight of Temperance, gets a particular mention in the *Areopagitica*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, general ed. Don M. Wolfe, 7 vols (New Haven and London, 1953–74), vol. 2, 515–6, as quoted below; all citations to the prose works are taken from this Yale edition unless otherwise stated.

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In *Huon* itself, Arthur, who had been promised the succession to the throne of fairyland by Oberon, threatens war against him when he chooses Huon as his heir instead and makes peace only when Oberon threatens to turn him into a werewolf. This fairyland, however, although clearly an 'otherworld', is not an underworld: its outskirts are reached by a flight through the air, followed by a climb over the top of a high mountain.[9] Yet, another possibility, this time to a source that we can be sure Milton saw, is to a marginal note in the later editions of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, where a scornful mention in the text of those who believe that Arthur was 'not dead, but conueied awaie by the faires into some pleasant place, where he should remain for a time, and then to returne againe', is glossed:

> As for example in a caue neere a water called pond perillous at Salisburie, where he and his knights should sleepe armed, till an other knight should be borne that should come and awake them.[10]

Wherever Milton's ideas came from, however, he was clearly prepared to move beyond the legendary-historical Arthur of Geoffrey, implied by those native kings and battles against the Saxons, to something that gave more scope to the imagination—and to add more imaginative detail of his own too. Such a process of re-imagining, or imaginative supplementation, reappears later in this essay in relation to Spenser and Malory as well.[11]

Milton's second reference to his plans for a British epic, written a few months later, comes in the *Epitaphium Damonis*, the pastoral elegy on the death of his friend Charles Diodati. This consists of a summary outline of the whole of British history from Brutus forwards, until, like Geoffrey, it homes in on Arthur.

> Ipse ego Dardanias Rutupina per aequora puppes
> Dicam, et Pandrasidos regnum vetus Inogeniae,
> Brennumque Arviragumque duces, priscumque Belinum,
> Et tandem Armoricos Britonum sub lege colonos;[12]
> Tum gravidam Arturo fatali fraude Iogernen
> Mendaces vultus, assumptaque Gorlois arma,
> Merlini dolus. O mihi tum si vita supersit,
> Tu procul annosa pendebis fistula pinu
> Multum oblita mihi, aut patriis mutata camoenis
> Brittonicum strides, quid enim? *Epitaphium Damonis* 162–71

9 *The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeux, done into English by John Bourchier, Lord Berners*, ed. S.L. Lee, EETS ES 40, 41, 43, 50 (1882–7; 2-volume reprint, 1973, 1998), 595–603.

10 *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 2nd edn (1587), 'The Historie of England', 92 (bk 2 ch. 14).

11 For a process of creative remembering somewhat analogous to this, see Ernest Sirluck's comment in relation to the error Milton makes over the detail concerning Guyon in the *Areopagitica*, that he 'was so familiar with *The Faerie Queene* that he thought he had no need to refresh his memory' (*Modern Philology* 48 (1950), 90–6).

12 This probably originates with William of Malmesbury: see Carey's note to line 165. The idea reappears in Milton's own *History of Britain*, vol. 5,149–50.

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I shall tell of Trojan keels ploughing the sea off the Kentish coast, and of the ancient kingdom of Inogene, daughter of Pandrasus, of the chieftains Brennus and Arviragus and of old Belinus, and of the settlers in Brittany, subject at last to British law. Then I shall tell of Igraine, pregnant with Arthur as a result of fatal deception: I shall tell of the lying features which misled her, and of the borrowing of Gorlois's armour, Merlin's trick. O, if I have any time left to live, you, my pastoral pipe, will hang far away on the branch of some old pine tree, utterly forgotten by me, or else, transformed by my native muses, you will whistle a British tune.

The final lines predict the shape of his poetic career on the Virgilian model, when he will leave behind pastoral for the heroic; but they also contain the first hint beyond his choice of a British subject for his epic that the language in which he writes it may well be English. Three years later, in *The Reason of Church-Government* of 1641, he spells that out as a fixed determination, to devote 'all the industry and art I could unite to the adornment of my native tongue', and to be 'an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Iland in the mother dialect'.[13]

The more Milton studied the materials of early British history, however, the more disillusioned he became, not least by Geoffrey's unreliability. It began to seem increasingly unpromising to write an epic where not only much of the action but also the central hero was under so much suspicion. The conventional attitude to Arthur, as expressed in Holinshed and others, was that there must be some germ of historical truth behind all the fables: 'Worthie was he doubtlesse, of whom feined fables should not haue so dreamed, but rather that true histories might haue set foorth his worthie praises';[14] but Milton's wider reading led him to doubt even that. His distrust of Geoffrey's version of British history was intensified, not just by the scepticism instigated by Polydore Virgil, but by his own attempts to go behind Geoffrey to the earliest historians, in particular Nennius, Gildas and Bede, who not only offered no support to the legends but also showed that their chronology was impossible. Geoffrey's claim had to be mendacious that he was writing 'out of a *British* Book . . . utterly unknown to the World, till more then 600 years after the dayes of *Arthur*, of whom . . . all other Histories were silent, both Foren and Domestic, except only that fabulous Book'.[15] That left Milton's epic not just without a hero but with no one sufficient to fill the place. The principles for the writing of heroic poetry as set out by Tasso, one of the authorities on epic theory cited in the *Areopagitica*, insisted that its subject must be sufficiently distant to allow space for the poet's invention, but also that it must be grounded in fact. The

13 *The Reason of Church-Government*, vol. 1, 811–2.

14 *Holinshed's Chronicles*, 'The Historie of England', 92 (bk 2 ch. 14). For an instance closer to Milton, Peter Heylyn likewise argues that the fables of Arthur do not nullify its claim to a core of truth as a parallel example to justify his writing his *Historie of that most famous saint and souldier of Christ Iesus; St George of Cappadocia* (second edition with appended revisions, 1633), 62.

15 *History of Britain*, vol. 5, 165–6.

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hero must be someone who could reinforce moral exemplarity with an actual historical existence, and Arthur did not match up.[16] For some years, he investigated the possibility of finding an alternative and better-attested 'K[ing] or Knight before the conquest' who might offer the 'pattern of a Christian *Heroe*', but that too led nowhere.[17] In the late 1640s, he put his research to use in his unfinished English prose *History of Britain*, a work eventually published in incomplete form shortly before his death, but its Arthur is frankly a historical embarrassment. It is not just that the king was 'more renown'd in Songs and Romances, then in true Stories', but 'who *Arthur* was, and whether ever any such reign'd in *Britain*, hath bin doubted heertofore, and may again with good reason'.[18]

So the historical Arthur had to be dismissed, and that dismissal is where scholarship on Milton's *Arthuriad* typically also stops. Even so, that was not all that Milton had to say about Arthur, and those other things are no less interesting. His preference for 'true stories' over 'Songs and Romances' may have been profoundly held at an intellectual and ethical level, but the history of his imagination tells a rather different story and goes back to a still earlier stage of his life. He was clearly fascinated by the romance Arthur, the hero of the tradition rooted in the thirteenth-century Vulgate French prose romances rather than in Geoffrey: hence, the Round Table sneaking into his outline of Galfridian history in the *Mansus*. In the romance tradition, furthermore, the absence of any claim to historicity removed much of the problem of untruth—'The poet nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth', in Sir Philip Sidney's famous formulation.[19] There is nothing to show that Milton took the hard line on poetic fiction that Plato had done, and especially not at this point of his career. The romance version of the Arthurian stories has the king largely superseded as British hero by the adventures of his knights; and the imaginative appeal of that tradition, especially as it appears in Malory and Spenser, is attested from some of his very earliest writings, the *Prolusions*—the academic exercises that he wrote as a student at Cambridge. These predate the *Mansus* by a decade or so, and the sixth, perhaps written in 1628, contains a revealing simile. He is making a joking comparison for his fellow-students' supposed courage, but his choice of image gives a glimpse of the grip that the chivalric Arthur held over his imagination:

Nec validissimi illi Regis *Arthuri* pugiles, igniti & flammigantis Castelli incantamenta vicerunt facilius...

16 *Torquato Tasso: Discourses on the Heroic Poem*, trans. Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (Oxford, 1973): the theme is pervasive throughout the first two books, but see in particular 6, 10, 25–6, 54.

17 *The Reason of Church-Government*, vol. 1, 813–4.

18 *History of Britain*, vol. 5, 164.

19 *Sidney's 'The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London, 2004), *Defence* 34.

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Nor did those valiant knights of King Arthur overpower and rout more easily the enchantments of a burning and blazing stronghold.[20]

The obvious Arthurian sources offer no immediate parallel for the allusion. It sounds more continental than English in inspiration, more Ariostan than Arthurian, but neither Italian nor French nor English narratives of Arthur, or of Charlemagne, offer anything obviously comparable. There are two possibilities as to where it came from. One is that Milton was indulging, unconsciously or possibly deliberately, in some creative Arthurian imaginings of his own. The second is a source at an angle to what is usually thought of as Arthurian romance, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, where the woman warrior Britomart finds herself faced with Busirane's stronghold, which is blazing with 'a flaming fire, ymixt with smouldry smoke/And stinking Sulphure' kept permanently burning by 'mighty enchauntments'; but 'resolu'd to proue her vtmost might', she assails the fire, and it divides before her (III.xi.21–5). A Spenserian source and some free-wheeling imagining on Milton's part are not necessarily mutually exclusive; it would be easy to draw Britomart's exploit into the ambience of the Round Table (even though in Spenser's narrative it has not yet been founded), as Britomart does ride in Arthur's company from time to time in the course of her adventures. It also fits closely with Milton's self-fashioning that Britomart is the knight of chastity in its Protestant definition (virginity before marriage and faithful love afterwards), the virtue he claimed, against considerable mockery from his fellow-students, as his own.

Milton's debt to Spenser is elsewhere acknowledged and overt, his reading in the more traditional Arthurian romances much less so. Such romance was, however, demonstrably a part of his imaginative furniture. He never offers it as part of his learning, as he does with the historical Arthur; but his references suggest a deep degree of engagement that would fit with his having come to Arthurian romance early, therefore probably in English (he acquired French and Italian only after he had become fluent in Latin and Greek) and therefore in Malory, whose *Morte Darthur* has left visible traces in his work. The *Morte* was reprinted in an edition supposedly expurgated for Protestant readers in 1634 (it was in fact very little changed), so the young Milton would have read it in one of its sixteenth-century prints. It is not the kind of educational reading his father encouraged him in, but that does not mean it was not available to him; and one of his father's close business associates, the poet John Lane, had passionate medieval interests. Lane turned the metrical romance *Guy of Warwick* into a twelve-book epic, and he took up the challenge of completing Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*, the story Milton himself described in *Il Penseroso* as the 'half-told . . . story of Cambuscan bold' (109–10), and gave it a comparably prolix treatment. Neither was published, but both manuscripts were prefaced with commendatory poems, among them one for each work carrying the

20 1628 is the date usually assigned to it; Campbell and Corns argue for 1631, *John Milton*, p. 58. For the text and translation, see *Prolusions* VI in the Columbia edition of *The Works of John Milton*, general ed. F. A. Patterson (New York, 1931–40), vol. 12, 230–1 (the Yale edition does not include Latin originals, and does not annotate the Arthurian allusion here).

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name of John Milton senior.[21] It is by no means impossible, even likely, that Lane helped to incite the boy's interests in the chivalry and tournaments he refers to throughout his life—if any stimulus beyond himself were needed.

The hold that the Arthurian legends had over him was not only imaginative; more surprisingly, it was ethical too. When Milton read Malory, he read it almost as if it were Spenser. He notes that dimension both in his Commonplace Book and in the *Apology for Smectymnuus* of 1642, when he describes his youthful attraction to such material, and, in particular, to the oath taken by the knights of the Round Table:

> I may tell ye whether my younger feet wander'd; I betook me among those lofty Fables and Romances, which recount in solemne canto's the deeds of Knighthood founded by our victorious Kings; & from hence had in renowne over all Christendome. There I read it in the oath of every Knight, that he should defend to the expence of his best blood, or of his life, if it so befell him, the honour and chastity of Virgin or Matron. From whence even then I learnt what a noble vertue chastity sure must be, to the defence of which so many worthies by such a deare adventure of themselves had sworne. And if I found in the story afterward any of them by word or deed breaking that oath, I judg'd it of the same fault of the Poet, as that which is attributed to Homer; to have written undecent things of the gods.

The poet's duty, furthermore, was not only to honour the highest ethical model offered within his material but also to replicate that pattern of virtue in himself:

> Only this my minde gave me that every free and gentle spirit without that oath ought to be borne a Knight, nor needed to expect the guilt spurre, or the laying of a sword upon his shoulder to stirre him up both by his counsell, and his arme to secure and protect the weaknesse of any attempted chastity. So that even those books which to many others have bin the fuell of wantonnesse and loose living, I cannot thinke how unlesse by divine indulgence prov'd to me so many incitements as you have heard, to the love and stedfast observation of that vertue. (1, 890–1).

That the Arthurian romances were an incentive to wantonness and loose living had been a long-standing charge against them, most famously in Ascham's acerbic remark about their encouragement of 'bold bawdry';[22] but to Milton, they had been an incentive to virtue, specifically the sexual virtue that he so strongly championed in his university years, by implication in his covert allusion to Britomart, in *Comus*, and in many of his later works. Chastity presented itself to him as an open way to achieve the virtue attaching to a knight, without any need for the outward symbols of the spur or the dubbing. Britomart, the chastity that can outface the enchantments of the blazing fortress, can provide the 'lady of Christ's', as his fellow-students nicknamed him, with moral inspiration in the vivid form of active prowess.

This may seem an almost perverse way of reading the romance Arthur, but it was clearly deeply felt. There were two texts in which Milton could have read of the Round Table oath. One was Malory's *Morte Darthur*, which itself drew on the oath taken as part of the fifteenth-century dubbing ceremony for Knights of

21 See the entry for Lane by Verne M. Underwood in the revised *DNB* <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/15993> accessed 27 July 2012.

22 Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, ed. Lawrence V. Ryan (Ithaca, 1967), 69.

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the Bath; the other, Harding's rhyme royal *Chronicle*. Milton notes in his Commonplace Book his reading of Harding's version of the oath, a note associated with his research into British history for his epic in the late 1630s rather than as a text he traversed with his 'younger feet', but he might well have been returning to his earlier reading.[23] Harding bases his version of the oath so closely on Malory's that their wording of their requirement for the defence of the chastity of both virgins and matrons is not sufficiently different for the account in the *Apology* to show decisively which version Milton had in mind. The fact that the *Apology* makes mention of 'solemne canto's' would seem to favour Harding, though the rest of the account of his literary wanderings and his triple use of Malory's term 'oath' (the *Chronicle* always describes it rather as a 'rule', a rule to live by on the analogy of a monastic rule) suggest that he was reading Malory as well. The *Chronicle*, as the Commonplace Book notes, instructs the knights of 'Arturs round table to use thire bodies to defend where law would not redresse'; it further specifies that need as referring to 'the fayth, the church, maydens, & widowes clene,/Chyldren also' and discourages them from 'shameful' love.[24] The oath in Malory forbids the knights from 'outragyousyte', apparently in the sense of rape, and backs that up with the injunction 'alweyes to doo ladyes, damoysels, and gentylwymmen socour vpon payne of deth.... Thus were all knyghtis sworne of the Table Rounde'.[25] Harding also gives a markedly scandal-free reading of the legends compared with Malory (Lancelot begets Galahad on Elaine 'in very clene spousage', and there is no hint of an affair with Guenevere):[26] that might enhance Milton's sense of the legends as endorsing sexual virtue, but it equally has the consequence that Harding's version would be impossible to imagine as 'the fuell of wantonnesse and loose living' for anyone. Taken as a whole, Milton's account of his reading in 'lofty Fables and Romances' strongly suggests Malory as well as Spenser and the more historical Harding, and that likelihood is confirmed by the Arthurian allusion in *Paradise Regained*, discussed below.[27] It is true that he nowhere names Malory

23 *Commonplace Book*, 1.495; John Harding, *The Chronicle of Iohn Harding*, ed. Henry Ellis (London, 1812), cap. lxxiii, 124–5. On the date, see Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford, 2000), 126. On Milton's Arthurian reading more broadly, William Poole's comment on the Commonplace Book offers a useful reminder that it records only what is pertinent to the categories for which he selects excerpts, and that those citations do not preclude much broader influence ('"The Armes of Studious Retirement"?: Milton's Scholarship, 1632–41', in Jones, ed., *Young Milton*, 21–47 (41)).

24 Milton picks up Harding's phrasing, 'With their bodyes, where lawe myght not redresse'. Harding's late-fifteenth century chronicle was printed in two different editions by Richard Grafton in 1543; the greatest textual differences come later in the text, and Milton would have found closely similar accounts of Arthur in either one.

25 *Caxton's Malory*, ed. James W. Spivak, 2 vols (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), III.15. All references to Malory are given to this edition, as all the early editions were based on Caxton, and his book and chapter numbers are given in all later editions too, including those based on the Winchester manuscript. The manuscript alone adds the clause that the knights are 'never to enforce' women.

26 Harding, *Chronicle*, 131 (ch. 76, misnumbered as 77).

27 Malory normally goes unmentioned as an item in Milton's reading; Lewalski's 'perhaps Malory' is about the closest recognition (*Life*, 12), and see note 25 below.

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explicitly as he does Harding, but it may well be that Malory was simply not highbrow enough by this time to be recorded by name: Chaucer and Spenser, whom he does cite, carried far more cultural cachet, Malory almost none.

Milton's early enthusiasm for Arthurian material rapidly became something to be repudiated rather than celebrated. Any epic that focused on a single martial monarch will inevitably have seemed increasingly distasteful as the political situation in England, and his own political views, developed, and that applied as much to his attempts to identify an alternative British or English model Christian hero other than Arthur. Arthur, furthermore, was supposed not only to have been buried at Glastonbury but also to have been one of the abbey's benefactors,[28] and his much-noted devotion to the Virgin cannot have helped to promote his cause with Milton either. There were ethical problems as well as religious ones. If Arthurian romance could inspire his younger self to virtue, his older self found the sheer fantasy element increasingly troubling. The problem lay not only in Arthurian material but also in the other great Renaissance epics he had read, of Ariosto and Tasso. Ariosto's followers and Tasso himself had both retrospectively provided moralized readings to compensate for the less than virtuous shenanigans of some of their characters (Ariosto's in particular), and those moralizations are picked up by their English translators: Harington's Ariosto has a note of 'The Morall' and 'Allegorie' at the end of each canto, and Fairfax's Tasso includes his preface expounding the allegory. The translations, as well as the originals, were a part of Milton's reading, and the moralizing was built in to their reception in England.[29] He had to face the fact that not only did the epic Arthur not fit the particular nature of his poetic ambition, but also that to write of the romance world of glamorous chivalry was, as he saw it, a misuse of his poetic powers. Invention, as required by Tasso, was one thing; escapist fantasy was something else altogether. He makes an explicit statement to that effect at a key point in *Paradise Lost*, in the introduction to the book in which Adam falls. Surveying his own role in the creation of the poem, he notes that he is

> Not sedulous by nature to indite
> Wars, hitherto the only argument
> Heroic deemed, chief mastery to dissect
> With long and tedious havoc fabled knights
> In battles feigned; the better fortitude
> Of patience and heroic martyrdom

28 Roebuck, 'Milton', 65, citing John Speed.

29 See *Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso translated into English Heroical Verse by Sir John Harington*, ed. Robert McNulty (Oxford, 1972), xxvii–xxxviii and at the conclusion to each canto; and Edward Fairfax, *Godfrey of Bulloigne*, ed. Kathleen M. Lea and T.M. Gang (Oxford, 1981), 88–93. At least one early seventeenth-century reader annotated his or her copy of *Godfrey* with marginalia alongside each stanza to the end of canto v that note either the plot progression or the moral (copy of the 1600 edition in personal ownership): typical examples are 'Graue Councells and the desyrs of youth seldom or neuer in league' (v.4) and 'Patience ye prince of all vertues' (v.47). On Milton's affection for both (recorded by his nephew), see Colin Burrow, *Epic Romance: Homer to Milton* (Oxford, 1993), 244–5.

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> Unsung; or to describe races and games,
> Or tilting furniture, emblazoned shields,
> Impreses quaint, caparisons and steeds;
> Bases and tinsel trappings, gorgeous knights
> At joust and tournament. *Paradise Lost* IX.27–37

His reason may tell him knightly combat is tedious, but those emblazoned shields, caparisons and steeds suggest something else: that such fantasies were not just a diversion from his true vocation, but a temptation rather than an opportunity. His references in both his epics to the Arthurian world make it sound delightful, but seductively so—dangerously so. Hence, his references to chivalric romance elsewhere in *Paradise Lost* take the form of similes for the fallen angels or devils, as when he compares the troops of devils in Hell to

> . . . what resounds
> In fable or romance of Uther's son
> Begirt with British and Armoric knights, *Paradise Lost* I.579–81

or with Charlemagne's troops from the Italian Renaissance epics. In *Paradise Regained*, one of the temptations of Christ takes the form of beautiful ladies who bring him food,

> Ladies of the Hesperides, that seemed
> Fairer then feigned of old, or fabled since
> Of faëry damsels met in forest wide
> By knights of Logres, or of Lyonesse,
> Lancelot or Pelleas, or Pellenore. *Paradise Regained* II.357–61

Of those names, Harding mentions only Lancelot; Spenser gives single passing references to Lyonesse and Pelleas, and Geoffrey contains only 'Loegria'. The whole set, in fact, comes straight from Malory. The allusions here, even more than his reference to the enchanted flaming castle, work through the imaginative force of the image rather than by specific citation. It is the general pattern of strange damsels encountered in forests across the whole *Morte* that seems to have been uppermost in Milton's mind, with the names selected for their resonance and their alliteration. If there is any one situation that would fit most closely, it would be Malory's early, and strangely imaginatively beguiling, adventure of the three damsels encountered at the fountain in the episode of Gawain, Uwain and Marhalt, though the wrong knights are involved there. Uwain and Marhalt carry less resonance (chivalric or poetic) than the set that Milton names; but Milton's three do all have fairy encounters of their own. Lancelot is abducted by Morgan le Fay while sleeping under a tree; Pelleas's main adventure concerns his rescue by and falling in love with Nenive, one of the damsels of the Lady of the Lake; and Pellenore brings Nenive to court.[30]

30 In Caxton's structuring, *Morte* IV.18-19 on the damsels at the fountain; VI.1 and 3 on Lancelot; IV.23-4 on Pelleas; III.12-4 and IV.1 on Pellinore. Lewalski suggests a confusion between Pellinore and his son Percival, with reference to Percival's encounter with the devil in drag (XIV.8-9) (*Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning, and Art of Paradise Regained*

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By the time Milton wrote these lines, the quality of imaginative seduction in the Arthurian stories is explicit: these damsels carry a Malorian sexual charge, not a Spenserian incentive towards chastity, and they are, after all, being supplied as a comparison to one of the temptations of Christ. Rationally, for Milton, that temptation had to be resisted by himself too. He had come to find this kind of romance fantasy acceptable only when it was allegorical, as in the 'sage and serious Poet' Spenser, for whom he maintained the highest regard throughout his life. The habit of reading chivalric romances allegorically went back a long way for him: as early as *Il Penseroso*, where he justifies such reading on the grounds that they contain an inner meaning beyond their manifest narrative:

> And if aught else, great bards beside,
> In sage and solemn tunes have sung,
> Of turneys, and of trophies hung;
> Of forests, and enchantments drear,
> Where more is meant than meets the ear. *Il Penseroso* 116–20

The justification that 'more is meant' admittedly takes second place to the real attraction of turneys and enchantments, but the lines do indicate how in the early 1630s at least he could incorporate chivalric romance into his sense of himself as a poet of the epic Arthur. *The Faerie Queene* resolved the dilemma for him, in its presentation of Arthurian romance as moral, political and theological allegory. By the time of Milton's composition of *The Reason of Church-Government*, his tract against the episcopate, the fantasy and the concealed meaning held equal weight in his mind. There, he compares prelates with

> that huge dragon of Egypt breathing out wast, and desolation to the land, unlesse he were daily fatn'd with virgins blood. Him our old patron Saint *George* by his matchlesse valour slew... And if our Princes and Knights will imitate the fame of that old champion, as by their order of Knighthood solemnly taken, they vow, farre be it that they should uphold and side with this English Dragon; but rather to doe as indeed their oath binds them, they should make it their Knightly adventure to pursue & vanquish this mighty saile-wing'd monster that menaces to swallow up the Land, unlesse her bottomlesse gorge may be satisfi'd with the blood of the Kings daughter the Church; and may, as she was wont, fill her dark and infamous den with the bones of the Saints. (2, 857)

The passage is strongly Spenserian, the dragon's sail wings coming straight out of Redcross-St George's fight with the papist dragon in the *Faerie Queene* (I.xi.10),[31] but it shows how allegory allowed even a poet who later turned increasingly

(London, 1966), p. 225): this is not impossible, but the fit with Milton's scenario is weak (in addition to the different name, Malory's location is a desolate rocky peninsula rather than a forest, and the 'damsel' arrives by ship). As with the much-cited instances of Don Quixote's windmills and Proust's madeleines, there may also be a case for thinking that Milton retained (or read) the opening sections of the work most thoroughly.

31 The note to the passage in the Yale Milton (2, 857) cites Peter Heylyn's *Historie of that most famous saint and souldier of Christ Iesus; St George of Cappadocia* (second edition with appended revisions, 1633) as Milton's source for the passage, but I have not found any confirmatory evidence there. Milton's firmly allegorical reading would also fit best with Spenser: Heylyn is most concerned with arguing for a basis of fact behind the fables.

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towards Calvinism could adopt a saint's legend for his own ends.[32] Spenser showed him how chivalric epic could be reconciled with moral purposes. In the *Areopagitica* (1644), Milton offers Guyon's experience in the cave of Mammon as a way of giving imaginative shape to moral experience:

> That which purifies us is triall, and triall is by what is contrary. That vertue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evill, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank vertue, not a pure; her whitenesse is but an excrementall whitenesse; Which was the reason why our sage and serious Poet *Spencer*... describing true temperance under the person of Guion, brings him in with his palmer through the cave of Mammon, and the bowr of earthly blisse that he might see and know, and yet abstain. (2, 515–6)

Spenser's chivalric and Arthurian epic, in fact, combines romance fantasy with 'the better fortitude/ Of patience' that most heroic poets left unsung. Temperance may have less grip on the imagination than Britomart's flamboyant attack on a blazing castle, but it is Guyon's model of temperance that looks forward to Christ's resistance to temptation in *Paradise Regained*.

Milton's regard for Spenser opens the way to a reconsideration of how his plans for a work based on British history might have been developing before he abandoned it altogether. The Trinity Manuscript, which records his thoughts about poetry around 1640, includes a set of possible plots for a tragedy rather an epic, 33 drawn from Galfridian British and early English history and five from Scottish history; the common source may well be Holinshed.[33] They are very perfunctory, little more than a list of deaths and disasters, and much the greatest space is given to a topic altogether different from history: the Fall of Man. He gives various synopses for such a tragedy, all more detailed than anything in his historical list: it would contain not only Adam and Eve but also numerous personifications, among them Conscience, Faith, Hope, Charity, and, as mutes, Labour, Sickness, Ignorance and Discontent.[34] The outlines he gives suggest a kind of hybrid between tragedy and morality play, or tragedy and masque, or a dramatic version of Spenserian allegory. The juxtaposition of the human Adam and Eve with such moral abstractions suggests a hypothetical trajectory for how his thoughts were progressing in the years after disillusionment with Arthur had begun to set in. He moves from his early dream of writing solemn cantos of the deeds of knighthood as practised under the great British king, to a realization that it was ethics, not fantasy, that mattered. Spenser had however already given material that was at least tangentially Arthurian just such a makeover; Milton would either have to look elsewhere if he were to combine them equally powerfully, or deal with them in different ways. Tragedy offered one such option, and perhaps those possible historical plots might have included something of the same strong morality element

32 Milton's long progress away from Anglicanism is one of the continuing themes of Campbell and Corns' *John Milton*.

33 *Outlines for Tragedies*, in the Columbia edition, vol. 18, 241–5.

34 Ibid. vol. 18, 228-32, and see Fowler's introduction to his *Paradise Lost*, 1–4.

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such as his ideas for the Fall of Man express. A historical subject would avoid the problem of the lack of human characters that a tragedy on the Fall would incur, but an element of personification added to the historical narrative would have enabled him to give expression to what in Ariosto and Tasso had been added in later as commentary, or to what Spenser had incorporated into his poem from the start through allegory.

That is speculation, given that we know even less about how Milton might have filled out those plots for tragedies than we do about his unwritten Arthuriad. What is certain is that he came to see his task, given his high estimate of his poetic vocation, as being to lead other readers by a more overt providence than he describes in the *Apology for Smectymnuus* away from the fuel of wantonness and loose living to that virtue higher than mere physical prowess, the individual steadfast resistance to evil. The Spenserian model of Guyon must replace the Malorian Arthur or Lancelot. He could write a poem or a drama where the virtues and vices clash directly, as he suggests in those outlines for a tragedy of the Fall; but Spenser had already done that for Arthur, and there was no obvious room for Milton to supplement him. What was left for him to do was to go back to the first principles of temptation, of virtue and failure, before wars or tournaments were ever invented. The writing of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* followed, not as a complete change of direction, but as a necessary conclusion to a long career of imaginative and ethical thinking.

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